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40 ■ Montana's asbestos-related deaths

Report uses information that is faulty

By SONJA LEE
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A report by a Washington, D.C.,-based public-interest research group shows that Cascade County has the highest number of deaths related to asbestos in Montana, but the report is based on faulty information, according to those closest to the issue.

The findings, released Thursday, are based on data collected by the Environmental Working Group. The agency analyzed federal mortality records around the country between 1979 and 2001.

In Cascade and Yellowstone counties, 34 asbestos-related deaths are reported in the group's review.

For many years, asbestos exposure was not listed as a cause of death, according to officials. The records reviewed by the group also are based on where death certificates are filed.

Because many asbestos victims from Montana die in treatment centers in larger cities, the findings of the study may not match up with the facts, said Pat Cohan, a registered nurse and program director for Libby's Center for Asbestos Related Disease.

Richard Wiles, senior vice president of Environmental Working Group and an author of the report, said the study is not flawed. It exposes the "gross inadequacies" in the federal system for reporting deaths related to asbestos, he said. He also said asbestosis was not listed as a cause of death for many years.

"There is no better evidence than Libby of how

inadequate the federal reporting system is," he said.

Lincoln County, where Libby is the county seat, comes in third for asbestos-related deaths in Montana, based on the group's analysis. Libby is nationally known for asbestos problems since disclosure five years ago that much of the town was contaminated with asbestos from a vermiculite mine that once operated there.

The research group's findings show only 33 federally reported deaths in Libby tied to asbestosis or mesothelioma. The Environmental Protection Agency has been working in Libby since 1999 media reports revealed that asbestos contamination was to blame for hundreds of illnesses and at least 200 deaths.

Gayla Benefield of Libby lost both parents to the disease asbestosis. She said "heart failure" is listed as the cause of death on their death certificates.

Benefield, one of the leading activists in Libby, said asbestosis often was listed on the second or third line of death certificates, and for years it was easily overlooked.

"That's where we fell through the cracks," she said. "It was easy to overlook and easy to hide that way."

The report lists only five or six deaths in Libby resulting from mesothelioma — a rare cancer of the lining of the chest or abdomen that most often is caused by asbestos exposure.

Cohan said in the last six

See REPORT, 3M

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